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ABSTRACT

This research brief reviews selected 1986 publications concerning the effects of class size on student achievement, attitudes, and behavior. The following points are made: (1) smaller classes in the lower grades have a positive effect on student learning attitudes and behavior; (2) minority, disadvantaged, and low-achieving students perform better in smaller classes; (3) lowering class size to 20 may have a positive effect on student learning, but lowering it only to 30 may not; and (4) while many positive results are believed to come from small classes, class size is but one of several variables affecting classroom climate and student achievement. (JAM)

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CLASS SIZE :

What's the Story ?

A Research Brief

Produced by
The Research Center

November, 1987

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ERIC Research Summary -- Class Size: What's the Story?

"I went in search of proof, but turned up pudding!" So complained a school board member in the June 1986 AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL, following a search of the literature on the relationship between class size and student achievement.

By December of the same year, however, things seemed to be looking up. The JOURNAL reported a Stanford University study which concluded that reducing class size to 20 is the third most effective teaching strategy, after tutoring and computer-assisted instruction -- especially in mathematics, but also in reading. Reducing class size was also found to be the second most cost-effective strategy. (Tutoring came in first.)

Research on class size stretches back into the 1950's. As with many other attempts to study classroom factors in isolation, however, the results have often been conflicting. But certain consistencies do emerge from a review of the documents on class size which were entered into the ERIC database in 1986 and 1987. Following is a summary of what those documents say.

The Educational Research Service (ERS), in a 1986 Research Brief, "Class Size Research," summarizes 100 class size research studies from 1950 to 1985 and concludes:

> The relationship between class size and student achievement varies "greatly across grades, among subject areas, and by instructional methods."
>
> The positive effect of smaller classes on student learning, attitudes and behavior is greatest at lower grade levels.
>
> Disadvantaged, minority and low-achieving students achieve more in smaller classes.

The National Education Association (NEA), in "What Research Says About: Class Size," one of a series of "Data-Search Reports," concludes that there is considerable agreement" on the following points:

> "Smaller class size seems to result in higher achievement among students who are economically disadvantaged" and "among students with lower academic ability."
>
> "It may be that class size affects student attitudes more significantly than it affects achievement.
>
> "A direct effect of large class size is to lower the morale and increase the stress of teachers.
>
> "There is typically little to be gained from reductions in class size that do not bring the class size below 30."

Both ERS and NEA point out the difficulty of drawing conclusions from studies of class size as an isolated variable. In its chart displaying the results of the 100 studies it reviewed, ERS adds a wide range of "additional factors" and comments in a special column, noting the probable influence of other factors on many of the results.

The NEA report also notes other factors in a chapter on the "Relationship of Class Size and the Educational Environment." Here, NEA cites research done in Minneapolis back in 1970, indicating that some ten "positive practices" take place more frequently in smaller classes. The researcher concludes that "merely reducing class size is no guarantee of increased pupil achievement....what does seem to happen is that teachers adjust accordingly and modify the teaching process to a more individualistic....approach."

An interesting additional highlight comes from an ERIC Digest published by the ERIC Clearninghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. This report states that "small schools have pioneered many educational 'innovations': non-graded classrooms, individualized instruction, cross-age groupings, peer tutoring, and emphasis on the basics," as well as using the community as a resource and mainstreaming mildly handicapped students. This ERIC Digest declares that "class size is related to pupil achievement, smaller classes are more conducive to improved pupil performance, smaller classes provide more opportunities to meet individual needs, pupils in small classes have more interest in learning, and teacher morale is higher in small classes."

This review of 1986 and 1987 entries into the ERIC database then, seems to indicate agreement on the following points:

Smaller classes in the lower grades have a positive effect on student learning, attitudes and behavior.

Minority, disadvantaged and low-achieving students perform better in smaller classes.

Lowering class size to 20 may have a positive effect on student learning, but lowering it only to 30 may not.

While many positive results are believed to come from small classes, class size is but one of several variables affecting classroom climate and student achievement.

- J. Newman
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